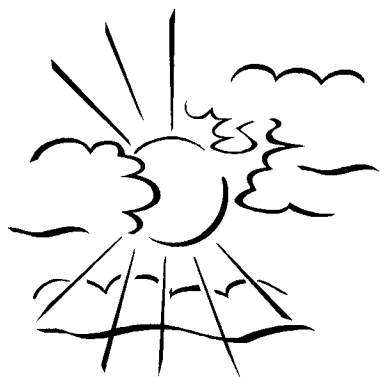


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Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

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Granholm, GOP leaders agree on budget size, but details need to be worked out

Saturday, September 10, 2005

By Peter Luke
Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Funding for the current school year would grow by \$175 per pupil, some universities would receive a boost in state aid and the fate of a private prison in Baldwin youth prison would be in Gov. Jennifer Granholm's hands under a state budget agreement announced Friday.

With an Oct. 1 deadline looming, Granholm and legislative leaders reached tentative agreement on a \$40 billion fiscal 2006 budget that isn't a whole lot different from the budget that's about to expire.

Republicans rejected Granholm's efforts to generate more than a \$150 million in additional revenue through tax loophole closings and a new tax on physician income.

Granholm, however, successfully opposed GOP attempts to trim the state's Medicaid health care rolls by more than 40,000 beneficiaries and to impose a strict, 48-month time limit on receiving cash welfare payments.

"Government has to live within its means," said Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming, who announced the agreement. "We have to take the revenue we have and live within that and that's what this budget does."

In a prepared statement, Granholm praised the budget agreement for ensuring "that funding for higher education, health care and services for our most vulnerable citizens are protected."

Sen. Robert Emerson of Flint, the Democratic leader in the Senate, was less excited. Given rising unemployment that has depressed tax revenue growth and boosted state health care costs for the poor and jobless, "we're doing the best with the hand we've been dealt."

The budget agreement, reached weeks after the traditional though unofficial Fourth of July deadline, provides a broad outline of a spending plan that will have to be crafted into legislation next week.

Tax growth in the state's \$11.2 billion K-12 school aid fund will allow for a \$175 increase in the basic per-pupil grant. The minimum grant will grow to \$6,875. Granholm also wanted to boost the grant an additional \$50 for each high school student to reflect the higher costs of secondary education, but she was rebuffed by Republicans.

Granholm apparently failed in her bid to overhaul the Michigan Merit Award that provides \$2,500 to college-bound high school students who pass the state's academic assessment test. Granholm had sought to boost the award to \$4,000, payable upon the completion of two years of college. The award currently is spread in equal installments over the first two years of college. Greg Bird, Granholm's budget spokesman, responded that the debate over college scholarships isn't over.

Republicans secured \$14 million in additional state aid for universities to begin establishing a minimum funding amount per student of \$3,650. All schools but Grand Valley State University will receive that minimum funding. GVSU falls about \$360 per student short of that floor, but would receive the largest percentage increase in overall state aid, 7.5 percent.

Saginaw Valley State University would receive a 7 percent increase in state aid, but University of Michigan campuses in Ann Arbor and Flint, and Western Michigan University would see essentially flat funding from fiscal 2005 levels. Central Michigan University would see a 2 percent increase.

There is also funding for a House Republican plan to begin distributing state aid according to a new formula. That plan reflects university enrollment growth and rewards schools with higher undergraduate degree completion rates and higher numbers of graduates in high-demand fields such as health care.

Granholtz had proposed saving more than \$18 million by ending the state's contract with the 480-bed Michigan Youth Correctional Facility in Baldwin. The maximum security "punk prison" has come under fire for its high cost of incarceration and high number of relatively low-risk juvenile offenders.

But the corporate-owned prison, which employs 229, is located in economically depressed Lake County represented by Republican lawmakers who sought to keep it open.

Sikkema said lawmakers will pass a \$1.8 billion Department of Corrections budget that will allow the governor to either terminate the contract or approve \$18 million in assorted prison budget cuts.

Liz Boyd, Granholtz's spokeswoman, said the governor would end the contract but that it wouldn't be the "deathknell" for the facility. The prison's owner, Florida-based Geo Group Inc., could contract with other state or federal prison systems to fill those beds with inmates, Boyd said.

Bill Nowling, Geo Group spokesman, said accepting prisoners from other states is impractical given the facility's remote location miles from an airport. He said the prison could accept adult Michigan prisoners, but the Granholtz administration has not been receptive.

Granholtz's chief goal in the budget was to avoid stripping social services benefits from recipients. The House Republican time limit on cash assistance benefits was replaced with an unspecified pilot program to place longer-term welfare recipients into employment.

In addition, Medicaid health care recipients, so-called caretaker relatives who are guardians of Medicaid-eligible children, will keep their benefits. So too will 18- and 19-year-old adults currently on the rolls.

Granholtz did agree to a Senate Republican plan to charge Medicaid recipients co-pays if they continue to smoke or engage in other unhealthy lifestyles. Trips for routine medical care made to emergency rooms instead of a primary care doctor's office would also be penalized with a required co-pay.

The \$8.97 billion budget is balanced in part through some \$200 million in funding shifts and stepped up tax enforcement.

Where precisely the cuts in individual departments will be made will be determined by lawmakers in the coming two weeks. The goal is to have budget bills on Granholtz's desk by Sept. 23 for signing, or veto, by Oct. 1.

"There are still a heckuva lot of details to be worked out," Bird said.

Budget: Lawmakers again buy time by deferring tough calls

There's plenty to nit-pick in the new budget deal at the State Capitol. Any state budget that allots more money to the governor's executive operation and the Legislature, for example, has its share of problems.

But state taxpayers should focus on the big picture here: The state continues to make fiscal commitments it cannot keep.

The budget deal for fiscal year 2006 is technically balanced. Legislative Republicans are trumpeting the fact this was done without tax or fee increases. Democrats are saying the budget doesn't impose new burdens on Medicaid recipients or K-12 schoolchildren.

It also doesn't move Michigan any closer to eliminating the state's structural deficit either.

Instead, the budget deal is like the last two budgets - Hoovering up any and every stray dollar to stave off difficult, but necessary, decisions.

Even the defining decision of this budget - the closing of the Baldwin youth prison - is being handled off-camera. The Legislature actually will authorize money for the Baldwin camp, but Gov. Jennifer Granholm is expected to line-item veto it with Republican consent.

But after such painful cuts, the Corrections Department is still targeted for \$100 million more in spending next year than it got this year, according to figures cited by the Gongwer News Service. To cover this, and other spending increases, the state will rely on a projected increase in state revenue identified in August, increased tax enforcement, money made off the state's tobacco settlement share and land sales.

This is the budgetary equivalent of paying your mortgage by cleaning out change from the sofa cushions and returning empty soda bottles.

Public Schools. Medicaid. Prisons. All are getting more money, and consuming an even-larger share of the state's budget pie. Yet few around the Capitol think these critical services are secure for the long term.

A little slicing ... a little jiggling ... and lawmakers think their principal duty is met. That's what passes for leadership in Lansing these days.

Hurricane may help advocates protect Medicaid, food stamps from planned cuts

Saturday, September 10, 2005

By Sarah Kellogg
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Protecting safety-net programs such as Medicaid and food stamps from federal budget cuts may be easier now that Hurricane Katrina has shown how essential these programs are and who they really serve, Michigan and national anti-poverty advocates say. As the cleanup continued Friday in New Orleans, a coalition of Michigan groups urged Congress not to reduce federal food assistance for the disadvantaged by cutting food stamps by as much as \$3 billion over five years.

"As we look at dealing with a disaster like Katrina, we see people fleeing to all parts of the country who have no income and no food," said Terri Stangl of the Center for Civil Justice in Saginaw. "This is a bad time to be looking at cuts when we see that this kind of program can make a huge difference."

The specter of Katrina is likely to hang over every federal budget decision in the coming weeks and to be fodder for Democrats and foes of President Bush who have been looking for a foothold to fight GOP budget-cutting measures.

In fact, anti-poverty advocates and state officials are hoping that the hundreds of thousands of refugees camped out in states across the nation will be allies in their battle to keep federal funding for social programs level if not increased.

"Now there is a human face on poverty that people can relate to," said Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services. "The priorities in the budget that the president proposed and Congress is considering are not aligned with helping those most in need."

A congressional agreement mandate that members find \$3 billion in savings over the next five years in the agriculture budget. The likely targets for those reductions are food stamps and farm subsidies. If they take the money from food stamps, about 4,000 of the roughly 1 million Michigan residents who receive food stamps could lose benefits.

GOP leaders had set Sept. 16 as the deadline to finalize the 2006 budget by adopting a series of reductions to meet spending targets. In the wake of Katrina, Republican leaders postponed that deadline, although they cannot delay forever since the 2006 budget begins on Oct. 1.

One of the most controversial reductions being considered is the mandate to squeeze \$10 billion over the next five years from Medicaid, the health insurance program for the disadvantaged and poor elderly.

"The Medicaid proposal is a reform proposal that is supported by the governors," said U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Holland. "I really think that the reforms to the entitlement programs should be looked at as a way to make more money available for relief efforts."

Pushing through those entitlement changes may be difficult if the public connects the value of housing programs, Medicaid, food stamps and other social safety net programs to Katrina refugees, some argue.

"Katrina may well be a fairly profound experience," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, a national health care advocacy group. "The images of two Americas in New

Orleans may have a more lasting impression on the American public than other events. Or it may not. We'll have to see."

White House officials say they're committed to staying on course with the budget strategy that includes trimming spending and extending tax breaks they say will boost the economy.

"We've got to continue to keep our economy growing," presidential spokesman Scott McClellan said Friday. "And that's important to making sure that we move forward on the budget that we have outlined."

But the eventual fallout of Katrina and the political and budget maneuvering in Congress that follow could have even more dramatic consequences in the long term for government itself, say observers.

"People are so horrified by what appears to be government failures to protect the people in New Orleans they may mistake their anger at particular decisions as disappointment with government in general," said Michael Lipsky⁰, a program director at Demos, a national public policy organization based in New York. "That would be an unfortunate outcome."

Don't cut off food help to 26,000 Michigan poor

Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Anyone who has read a word about the brutal impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans' low-income families has certainly come to understand the vulnerability of the poor.

That's why we find it troubling that Congress, looking for places to cut the federal budget, is contemplating taking a \$3 billion bite out of funding for food stamps.

To qualify, one now must have an income no more than 200 percent of the poverty level, though Congress is considering lowering the maximum income allowable to 130 percent of the poverty level. By changing eligibility requirements, about 26,000 people in Michigan would lose their food-stamp assistance.

We know the federal budget is in dire straits, crushed between tax cuts, a war in Iraq and, now, the staggering cost of relocating hundreds of thousands of people leaving the devastated Gulf Coast and rebuilding its ruined cities and towns.

We've argued repeatedly against balancing federal and state budgets on the backs of the poor.

Affluent people were able to flee the hurricane, find new places to live and now will be able to quickly rebuild their lives. So it is that the affluent can more easily survive budget cuts directed at them-- be it a loss of merit scholarships or municipal golf courses -- than can the poor.

We all know how soaring gasoline prices have made life more difficult for middle-class families. Climbing heating costs this winter will add to their strife. The poor also will face those same increases in gasoline and heating costs, and many will be crushed by them. Taking food stamps away from 26,000 low-income Michigan residents will only compound their desperation.

And cutting 26,000 from the food stamp program will only serve to put more pressure on private philanthropy which, in Michigan, has been serving the state's poor -- the ranks of which have been growing annually for the last five years. The average number of people who line up for free meals at Ministry With Community in Kalamazoo has grown to an average of 225 a day. Many of these people have jobs, but can't make ends meet. And food banks are reporting more demand. In a post-Katrina nation, demands on both public assistance and private charity will continue to grow in intensity.

Hurricane Katrina has made the poor of New Orleans, who had been invisible, shockingly visible.

Michigan's poor remain largely invisible, but they're still hurting. The rest of us may not see them struggling to put a decent roof over their heads, or skimping on heat in the winter, or trying to ignore aching teeth because there's no money to see a dentist. Whether we see it or not, they're struggling.

The last thing they need is to find that their food assistance is gone.

Sheriff: 11 Kids Kept Locked In Cages

Kids Ages 1 To 14 Kept In Ohio Garage, Sheriff Says

UPDATED: 7:12 am EDT September 13, 2005

CLARKSFIELD TOWNSHIP, Ohio -- Sheriff's deputies removed 11 children from a home where they were locked in cages less than 3½ feet high, authorities said.

The children's adoptive and foster parents, Mike and Sharen Gravelle, denied that they'd abused or neglected the children during a custody hearing Monday in Huron County. No charges had been filed as of Monday night.

"The impression that we got was that they felt it was OK," said Lt. Randy Sommers of the Huron County Sheriff's Office.

The Gravelles said a psychiatrist recommended they make the children -- ages 1 to 14, with conditions that included autism and fetal alcohol syndrome -- sleep in the cages at night. The cages were stacked in bedrooms on the second floor of their house, said prosecutor Russell Leffler, who was reviewing the case.

The children were found by a children's services investigator on Friday when he stopped by the Gravelles' home outside Wakeman, about 50 miles west of Cleveland. Deputies returned to the house that evening.

Some of the cages were rigged with alarms, Sommers said; others had heavy furniture blocking their doors. The children didn't have blankets or pillows.

One of the boys said he'd slept in the cage for three years, Sommers said.

The children were placed with four foster families Monday.

A woman who identified herself as Sharen Gravelle's mother but refused to give her name said the children were happy and loved. "This year they have played and had fun and laughed like no other children have, which they have never been able to do," she said.

The Gravelles do not have a listed telephone number.

Sommers said there were no apparent signs the children had been malnourished or beaten, but they were sent to a hospital for examination. Their conditions were not available Monday.

In March, a couple who had recently moved from Ohio to Florida was charged with neglect when their adopted teenager was discovered malnourished in a crib-like cage. The then-17-year-old weighed 49 pounds, investigators said.

The twin-bed-sized crib had been prescribed when the boy was much younger and lived in Ohio. It had been fitted with a lid, chains and a padlock, investigators said.

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11 Children Are Found Locked in Small Cages in an Ohio Home

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published: September 13, 2005

WAKEMAN, Ohio, Sept. 12 (AP) - Sheriff's deputies found 11 children locked in cages less than three-and-a-half feet high inside a home, but the adult couple living in the home denied that they had abused or neglected the children, the authorities said Monday.

A judge put the children, ages 1 to 14, in foster homes.

They were found in nine cages built into the walls of the house near this small city in northern Ohio, the Huron County Sheriff's Office said. The children had no blankets or pillows, and the cages were rigged with alarms that sounded if opened, Lt. Randy Sommers said.

The children told the authorities that they slept in the cages - 40 inches high and 40 inches deep - at night. Doors to some of the cages were blocked with heavy furniture.

The couple living in the home, Sharen and Mike Gravelle, are adoptive or foster parents for all 11 children, officials said. Prosecutors were reviewing the case, but no charges had been filed as of Monday night.

A children's services investigator saw one of the children in a cage on Friday, Lieutenant Sommers said. The sheriff's office obtained a warrant and returned to the house that evening and removed the children.

The Gravelles do not have a listed telephone number.

A woman who identified herself as Mrs. Gravelle's mother but would not give her name said the children were happy.

"This year they have played and had fun and laughed like no other children have, which they have never been able to do," she said.

At a hearing, the judge placed the children in the custody of the Department of Job and Family Services, and officials placed them in four foster homes, said Chris Mushett, a juvenile-court administrator.

Appearing with a lawyer at the hearing, the Gravelles denied they had abused or neglected the children.

Russell Leffler, a county prosecutor, said the children had various disabilities, including autism. Wakeman, with a population of about 1,000, is about 50 miles west of Cleveland.

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Day care owner gets probation

Canton Twp. woman pleaded no contest to child abuse after sex charge was dropped.

By Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

CANTON -- A day care owner was sentenced to one year of probation Monday after pleading no contest to a count of second-degree child abuse in exchange for an agreement by prosecutors to drop a sexual assault charge.

The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office agreed to the bargain because it was convinced it couldn't prove a case of criminal sexual conduct against Nancy Podorsek, 43, because the child was 2 -- too young to explain what happened.

"We are not very happy with the outcome," her husband, Bill Podorsek, said Monday. "The whole thing was blown utterly out of proportion. The kid was covered in feces and threw a tantrum in the shower and injured herself.

"Nancy is the nicest person in the world and would never hurt anyone."

Said the victim's mother:

"The message that's being sent is, if you want to go after a kid, go after a young kid so you don't have any witnesses. The criminal justice system didn't help her. They didn't do anything for her. If there's no DNA evidence and there's nobody who can say what occurred, there's nothing you can do."

The Detroit News does not identify possible victims of sexual assault, and is withholding the name of the mother to protect the privacy of the child.

The girl's mother discovered bruising around the child's lower abdomen after picking her up from Podorsek's home-based day care in June. The mother took the girl to the hospital, where doctors confirmed the bruising.

Podorsek, who took care of six children full-time and others part-time, told police that she had become angry when the little girl soiled new carpet. She admitted to putting the girl in a garbage bag and leaving her in the bathtub while Podorsek cleaned up the rug.

The woman claimed that the injury occurred during a rough scrubbing.

Podorsek initially was charged with one count of criminal sexual conduct, which does not involve penetration, and one count of child abuse.

"We had to prove she did this in a sexual manner, for revenge or humiliation," said Lora Weingarden, the lead attorney in charge of the Wayne County prosecutor's child abuse unit.

"We were concerned that a jury would find she did not act in a sexual manner because she was cleaning the child.

" Weingarden added: "On this case, thankfully, we were able to get something. We got a conviction and she is being held accountable."

You can reach Karen Bouffard at (734) 462-2206 or kbouffard@detnews.com.

Girl, 4, Falls From Second-Floor Window

Doctors Believe Child Suffered Closed-Head Injury

POSTED: 1:13 pm EDT September 12, 2005

A 4-year-old girl was seriously injured after falling from a second-floor window at her Ann Arbor home this weekend.

The child was playing upstairs in her family's home, located in the 3100 block of Braeburn Circle, at about 5 p.m. Friday when the incident occurred, according to a report in *The Ann Arbor News*. The girl apparently climbed to a window, accidentally fell out and hit a sidewalk below, said Detective Sgt. Jeff Connelly in the paper's report.

The girl's family members were in the living room at the time.

"It sounds like it was just strictly an accident," said Connelly in the paper's report.

The child was conscious and crying when emergency crews arrived at the scene, according to the report. She was transported to the University of Michigan Medical Center where doctors said she may have suffered a head injury.

No further information was available.

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Burton gets 4 to 20 years in prison

Trace Christenson

The Battle Creek Enquirer

A Battle Creek woman is going to prison for her part in a sexual assault of a young girl last Christmas.

Julia Burton, 34, was sentenced Monday to four years and two months to 20 years on charges of aiding and abetting first-degree criminal sexual conduct of a 12-year-old girl and providing drugs to a 14-year-old girl.

Burton pleaded no contest in April to the charges just before she was scheduled to stand trial on several charges, including sexual assault. She could have been sentenced to life in prison if convicted in that trial.

She was arrested after the younger girl told Battle Creek police she had run away from home and been in the Burton house over Christmas, where she had sex with Burton's husband, Milo Burton, and other men.

Julia Burton entered the plea and agreed to testify against her husband and one of the men who police said paid Milo Burton to have sex with the girl.

Burton testified in the trial of Krupakar Jogannagari, 25, of Kalamazoo, charged with having sex with the 12-year-old girl. He was acquitted of the charge by a circuit court jury.

"Part of the plea agreement was to cooperate and she did testify and she was ready to testify in the case against Milo Burton," Defense Attorney Mark Webb told Judge Conrad Sindt.

Milo Burton pleaded guilty last week to having sex with the girl and will be sentenced Oct. 3.

Trace Christenson covers crime and courts. He can be reached at 966-0685 or tchrist@battlecr.gannett.com.

Defendants enter plea deals in CSC cases

By Dale Killingbeck, Cadillac News

CADILLAC - Two separate high-profile criminal sexual conduct cases resulted in plea deals Friday.

Dennis Truair Jarvis, 34, of Manton pleaded guilty to one count of criminal sexual conduct, third degree. Ten counts of criminal sexual conduct, first degree - all potentially life offenses - were dismissed.

Wexford County Prosecutor William Fagerman said he made the deal for the potential 15-year felony with Jarvis because of possible difficulties with the victim's testimony.

"We were very concerned about the witness coming through for us," he said. Fagerman said criminal sexual conduct cases in general pose special difficulties for prosecutors.

Jarvis initially was charged in three counties following his arrest in Benzie County in March. Police received a tip regarding a meeting with his former foster daughter, and followed the pair to a wooded area and made an arrest.

In Grand Traverse County, the clerk's office reported Jarvis was sentenced last month to eight to 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to criminal sexual conduct, third degree, and three to five years in prison after pleading guilty to attempted kidnap/child enticement.

A Benzie County prosecutor dismissed three charges against Jarvis after he was charged in Grand Traverse and Wexford counties. The most serious charge in that county was kidnapping/child enticement

A pre-sentence investigation will precede Jarvis' sentencing in Wexford County.

Also Friday, Ronnie Ray Crane, 51, of Burton pleaded guilty to two counts of criminal sexual conduct, third degree. He had been charged with nine counts of criminal sexual conduct, first degree.

The charges stemmed from incidents in January 1999 in Slagle Township.

Crane also faced charges in Genesee County, Fagerman said. He said the Crane case also involved a young witness.

A Genesee County clerk's office spokeswoman said Crane awaits sentencing on Sept. 26 after pleading no contest to one count of criminal sexual conduct, third degree. Two counts of criminal sexual conduct, first degree, were dismissed.

A pre-sentence investigation will precede Crane's sentencing in Wexford County.

Sep 12, 6:31 PM EDT

Granholm signs laws restricting minors' access to explicit video games

By OLIVIA MUNOZ

Associated Press Writer

DETROIT (AP) -- With mature-rated game boxes spread on the table in front of her, Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed legislation that would make it illegal to sell or rent sexually explicit video games to those 17 and younger.

"These are not just harmless games. The child becomes the protagonist," Granholm said before signing the legislation Monday afternoon in Detroit.

The governor expects to sign two more bills later this week restricting minors from buying or renting video games she called "ultra-violent."

Disseminating sexually explicit matter to minors is a felony punishable by up to two years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Hal Halpin, president of the Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association, said the video game industry almost certainly will file a lawsuit. Federal courts have struck down video game bans approved by Washington state, Indianapolis and St. Louis County in Missouri, saying they encroached on the First Amendment.

"Generally speaking, we feel it's unfair to single out games as an art form and treat them differently from music and movies," Halpin said.

Granholm said she is confident the Michigan law will hold up.

"We are adopting the entertainment software's standards. We're merely asking them to card," she said.

Halpin said stores already are voluntarily asking teens to show ID when trying to buy mature-rated games.

"Our goal is to card at the same success rate as movie theater owners," he said. "Legislating us to do what we've already committed to is unnecessary.

"Granholm acknowledged that several retailers have already stepped up to prevent selling adult-rated games to minors or remove them from their stores altogether.

But she said a sting coordinated with the Wayne County Sheriff's Department found that about half of the 58 stores investigated sold adult-rated video games to people under 17 without asking for ID. Some buyers were as young as nine.

"As a mother I certainly am always looking out for my children. As governor, I'm looking out for all the children of Michigan," she said.

"These laws put the power back in the hands of the parent," she said.

Granholtz signed another law requiring retailers to post a sign explaining the rating system used for video games, something Halpin said many already do. Under the law, failure to post the sign would be punishable by up to a \$1,000 fine.

The governor likened the video games to alcohol and other materials that are "kept behind the counter."

The Entertainment Software Rating Board, a self-regulatory body set up by the gaming industry, has set up a video game rating system similar to movie ratings. The "M" rated games may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.

Mature-rated games comprised 12 percent of all new games released last year and 16 percent of sales. "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," criticized for violence and an Internet download that allows for sexually graphic scenes, was the highest-selling game of 2004.

Associated Press Writer David Eggert in Lansing contributed to this report.

September 12, 2005

GOVERNOR SIGNS RESTRICTIONS ON VIDEO GAMES

Persons who sell or rent highly violent or sexually explicit video games to children will face new criminal penalties under a legislative package that was partially enacted with the signing of two bills on Monday by Governor Jennifer Granholm.

"This new common-sense law is one more tool we can provide to help parents protect their children from the effects of violence and graphic adult content," said Ms. Granholm in signing HB 4702 and HB 4703 (public act numbers were not yet assigned). The governor had called for the legislation in her State of the State address.

The two main bills in the package (SB 416 and SB 463, which establish the ban on selling or renting to minors and provide for criminal penalties) are awaiting final action in the Senate and the governor's signature, which is expected later this week.

The bills signed by the governor add video games to existing law prohibiting the distribution of sexually explicit material to minors, a law which provides felony punishment and penalties of up to two years in prison and/or a fine of \$10,000. They also require a video game retailer to post prominent signs about video game rating systems to aid customers in selecting appropriate games.

The bills are effective December 1.

A lawsuit against the package is expected to be filed by national retail trade group, Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association, which objects to the bills still awaiting final action in the Senate. In an August 31 letter to members of the House, Hal Halprin, president of the group, said retailers are committed to voluntarily enforcing and promoting the video game rating system, and said restrictions in SB 416 violate First Amendment free speech protections for video games.

Mr. Halprin said video games are not like alcohol or firearms in how they may be regulated, but instead are within the universe of entertainment and media for which free speech protections apply. "This matter has already been settled several times in the court system," he said.

He said a lawsuit will be filed quickly after the last bills are signed and expects the same result as in three other states where the association won reversal of video game restrictions.

But several other states are contemplating laws similar to the new Michigan controls.

Sen. Hansen Clark (D-Detroit), who had led the legislative effort, said the package is an important step to protecting children and leaving the power to do so in the hands of parents. "This legislative victory will help give parents the knowledge to make informed decisions about what is right for their children," he said.

That bill prohibits anyone from knowingly disseminating to a minor an ultra-violent explicit video game, with a civil penalty provided for violations, but allows persons to argue against punishment if they acted in good faith.

Laws To Restrict Access To Explicit Video Games

Video Game Industry May File Lawsuit

POSTED: 3:49 pm EDT September 12, 2005

DETROIT -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm signed legislation that would make it illegal to sell or rent adult-rated video games to those 17 and younger.

"These are not just harmless games. The child becomes the protagonist," Granholm said before signing the legislation Monday afternoon in Detroit.

Hal Halpin, president of the Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association, said the video game industry almost certainly will file a lawsuit. Federal courts have struck down video game bans approved by Washington state, Indianapolis and St. Louis County in Missouri, saying they encroached on the First Amendment.

"Generally speaking, we feel it's unfair to single out games as an art form and treat them differently from music and movies," Halpin said.

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Will alarms keep kids from being left on buses?

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

By Dave Murray
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Buzzers and blaring horns soon may tell some Kent County school bus drivers whether they have checked for students left on board.

Kent Intermediate School District leaders say they are "strongly encouraging" Dean Transportation to include the device -- already mandated by law in two states -- in all of buses in the wake of a special-education student being left behind Friday.

Dean's owner, Kellie Dean, said his company is to be among the first in the state to use the devices and expects them to be installed on all Dean buses in West Michigan by the end of this fall.

KISD leaders said driver Norman Young, 52, of Grand Rapids, was fired Friday after he failed to check whether students still were on the bus when he pulled away from Meadowlawn Child Development Center in Kentwood and violated policy by taking the bus home -- with a 4-year-old girl still strapped in her seat.

The girl's family members said they believe the district and Dean Transportation did everything correctly, but are frustrated that such a thing could happen.

"The system still failed," said Kathy Steve, grandmother of Sage Sitch, who has a severe language impairment and is developmentally delayed.

"The human error is unacceptable because our granddaughter could have died," Steve said. "The person responsible for this needs to be held accountable."

KISD leaders said Young delivered students to Meadowlawn, and most walked off the bus when he was having a conversation with a school employee.

They said Young did not see Sage still strapped in her seat, and did perform the required safety inspection, where a yellow card is placed in the back window of the bus to show that no students are on board.

Young then was headed to Kentwood's bus garage, but stopped at his residence on Fuller Avenue SE, telling administrators he had to make a phone call regarding medicine for his wife.

Sage was discovered missing when the school called her home to verify she was absent. The driver eventually was discovered to be at his home. KISD leaders say the child was alone on the bus for about 15 minutes; the family believes it was more than an hour.

Young could not be reached for comment.

"What happened was inexcusable -- we can't excuse it, and we don't defend it," KISD Superintendent Michael Weiler said Monday. "There is nothing more precious than safely transporting students to school. Parents place their trust in us to do that properly."

The number of students left on buses fell dramatically after educators adopted the procedure with the yellow cards. There were 33 Kent or Ottawa county children left on school buses between 1992 and 1997, but seven incidents have occurred since. That includes a Grand Rapids kindergartener left on a bus eight hours in October and a Zeeland pre-schooler left for three hours in May.

Dean said about 100 of his buses have been using the electronic alarms for about a year.

His company supervises special education runs for much of county and was contracted to transport Grand Rapids students this year.

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

State rewards healthy living

Plan offers incentives to Medicaid recipients who quit smoking, keep doctor's appointments, stay fit.

By Mark Hornbeck / News Lansing Bureau

The Detroit News

LANSING -- Rather than cutting poor people off state health care coverage, Michigan officials have agreed to take a different approach to curbing runaway Medicaid costs: the state will set forth incentives for healthy behavior, such as quitting smoking, keeping doctor's appointments and staying trim.

Those who practice good health would get lower monthly co-pays or expanded benefits.

The plan is part of a budget deal announced late last week between Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers.

"It's exciting. We have an opportunity to make people healthier rather than just pay for their health care coverage," said Sen. Tom George, R-Kalamazoo, a practicing physician and the chief architect of the plan.

The details must be worked out, but George said a portion of the state's 1.4 million Medicaid recipients will come under the program. Small children and the disabled, for example, will be exempt.

The wellness promotion may be targeted to so-called "optional adults" who get benefits even though the federal government doesn't require they be covered.. For example, recipients who smoke, as determined by a urine test, may pay a \$10 monthly co-pay. Those who quit might see that payment cut in half.

People who get regular checkups and keep their weight down may be eligible for expanded prescription coverage or dental services, which are not currently offered.

Michigan must tailor its plan so it can get a federal waiver, George said.

But he said he's optimistic because Iowa recently received a waiver for a similar program.

"We're spending \$8 billion on Medicaid in this state and we're getting nothing in return. We have a very unhealthy Medicaid population," George said, noting that the incidence of smoking and obesity is higher among those on the Medicaid rolls.

He added that healthy behavior requirements for employment and health care insurance are catching on among some private businesses.

But Sharon Parks, an analyst with the Michigan League for Human Services, said the plan is unfair because unhealthy behavior is a societal problem and this approach singles out the poor.

"This is a group of people who in some ways have less control over their lifestyles than the rest of us," she said. "Fresh produce and other health foods are often more expensive than fatty foods. And exercise may depend on the safety of neighborhoods or equipment people have access to.

"Enforceability is a real question," Parks added. "If the state is going to put money and staff into enforcement, there would have to be a diversion of resources away from other services."

The personal responsibility program was not Granholm's idea, but Greg Bird, spokesman for the state Department of Management and Budget, said the governor "always felt it important to encourage healthy lifestyles and we're absolutely willing to work with the Legislature on this."

You can reach Mark Hornbeck at (313) 222-2470 or mhornbeck@detnews.com.

Medicare changes confusing

Officials fear seniors will be overwhelmed by new prescription drug choices

PUBLISHED: September 13, 2005

By Chad Selweski
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

In the coming weeks, Michigan senior citizens will be hit with a barrage of information about the new Medicare prescription drug coverage, plus an advertising blitz from insurance companies touting their policies as the best deal, under the new private-public partnership that takes effect Jan. 1.

Officials fear seniors will be overwhelmed by the complex web of information. Hundreds of thousands of elderly could seek help from state and local programs that don't have the manpower to answer all their questions. What's more, those retirees who throw up their hands in frustration and fail to sign up for a drug plan will face financial penalties if they register after the deadline. Sandy Hann, a senior resource advocate for the Macomb County Department of Senior Citizen Services, said her agency has experienced growing anxiety among the 122,000 seniors and disabled in Macomb who are eligible for the program.

"What we are dealing with are very, very scared seniors who are overwhelmed and don't know where to turn," Hann said. "We are trying to comfort them and alleviate their fears."

Though the program, adopted by Congress in 2003, is funded by Medicare, the coverage will be provided by private insurers who will offer a myriad of drug plans.

On Oct. 1, insurance companies -- up to 20 will be offering plans in Michigan -- begin advertising their coverage packages. By early October, as the sales pitches unfold, the details of each plan should be public.

The enrollment period begins Nov. 15 and runs through May 15, though coverage begins Jan. 1.

Under the program, Medicare will pay 75 percent of drug costs, up to a maximum of \$2,250 in yearly spending. In exchange, program recipients will pay a \$250 deductible, a monthly premium of approximately \$37, and 25 percent of drug costs out of their own pocket.

Once the \$2,250 level is reached, no additional coverage is available until annual spending on prescriptions reaches \$5,100. At that point, "catastrophic coverage" kicks in and Medicare will cover 95 percent of expenses.

And that's only the beginning of the complications involved in assessing the program and choosing a plan.

Nearly 1.5 million Medicare recipients in Michigan will have a narrow window to make decisions.

If a senior initially declines and then decides after the May 15 deadline to enroll, they will be hit with a 1 percent increase in their premium for each month of delay. For example, a senior hit with health problems two years after the deadline, a medical setback that requires expensive medications and provides good reason to enroll in the program, would pay a permanent 24 percent surcharge on monthly premiums.

The state is relying on about 500 volunteers to handle seniors' calls and questions about the program and various drug plans. In Macomb County, Hann is one of three senior advocates available to provide assistance.

Sharon Gire, director of the state Office of Services to the Aging, said she wishes the program had been gradually phased in. The state received about \$1 million in federal money to finance efforts to educate seniors about the details.

"Our goal is to give people enough information so they can make an informed choice, but we have limited resources," said Gire, a former state representative from Clinton Township.

Officials say the first decision to be made by many seniors with quality retirement benefits is whether the drug coverage they are currently provided by their former employer is as beneficial as the Medicare plan.

At the other end of the spectrum, low-income seniors must determine if they qualify for a special feature of the plan that offers coverage with very little out-of-pocket costs for those living in poverty. Three levels of subsidies are offered for seniors living at 150 percent, or less, of the poverty level.

One quirk in the program: Low-income seniors who also receive Medicaid coverage will be randomly assigned to a plan if they don't enroll by Jan. 1. That's because past state and federal provisions that provided help with drug costs for the poor are ending.

Seniors who will be shopping around for a plan must also be aware that the types of drugs covered by any package insurers offer can change over time. An appeals process has been established to handle disputes.

As for how to pay the deductible and premiums, recipients will have to decide if they want the costs deducted from their monthly Social Security check.

At a lengthy presentation on the new program provided Monday to the Macomb County Board of Commissioners, many of the commissioners were shaking their heads or sarcastically chuckling as the layers of complexity were explained in detail.

"It is confusing. It's a mess actually," said Commissioner Philis DeSaele, a Sterling Heights Republican. "I don't know how in the world a lot of our seniors are going to make these decisions."

Over the next several months, the Department of Senior Citizen Services will be holding forums at senior housing complexes and hosting enrollment meetings at public buildings, as well as making home visits to senior shut-ins.

The state, through the Area Agency on Aging, hopes to recruit more volunteers in the coming weeks. Advertisements by the state Department of Community Health have begun airing on radio to alert seniors about available assistance.

Officials speculate that some Macomb County seniors may shun the Medicare program in favor of their existing means of acquiring drug discounts. Some obtain drugs at cheaper prices from Canada, and about 20,000 use the county's prescription drug discount card, which offers an average savings of 34 percent per prescription.

Estimates indicate that the average senior who signs up for Medicare coverage will still pay about 78 percent of their annual drug costs, due to the out-of-pocket expenses associated with the program.

Beyond all the financial factors to be weighed, seniors are already being warned that some companies may engage in scams to lure customers.

"People need to be aware that there will be some fraudulent activity out there," said Louanne Bakk, director of benefits assistance for the Area Agency on Aging, Region 1-B.

For more information about the Medicare program, call the Michigan Medicare Medicaid Assistance Program at (800) 803-7174 or the Macomb County Department of Senior Citizen Services at (586) 469-6313.

Woman's money gone, caregiver could be, too

September 13, 2005

BY NATE TRELA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A little more than two years ago, Frances Parker wanted a little security and a little companionship. And she thought she'd get all that by allowing Pren Karaqi, a man who lived a block up the street, to move in.

RELATED CONTENT

Questions to ask before hiring a health care provider

What the now-87-year-old Warren woman ended up with, prosecutors say, was a man who drove a wedge between her and her family, charmed his way into her will and drained nearly \$200,000 from her savings.

Chances are she'll never get it all back. Karaqi, 52, pleaded no contest Monday to one count of embezzlement from a vulnerable adult and is looking at up to 11 months in jail under state guidelines when Macomb County Circuit Judge Donald G. Miller sentences him Oct. 13.

And because Karaqi was in the United States illegally, both the prosecutor handling his case and his defense attorney expect he will be deported to his native Kosovo the day he walks out of the county jail.

"If we had gone to trial and gotten an acquittal, it would have been the same outcome -- he'd be deported," said Vincenzo Manzella, Karaqi's attorney.

Macomb County Assistant Prosecutor John Latella said Karaqi preyed on Parker's trust.

"He knew she was fearful ... and he told her he was a nurse and that he'd take care of her," said Latella, who runs the county's senior crime unit.

Manzella said Karaqi took care of Parker for more than two years, doing everything from washing sheets to driving her for errands and paying the bills.

"If he took the money and disappeared 2 1/2 years ago, I'd say, yeah, he's a bad guy. But he stuck around," Manzella said.

But Karaqi had reason to stay, Latella said, even after he transferred

\$85,000 of Parker's money to a Swiss bank account. In August 2003, Parker changed her will to give almost all of her assets -- including her house -- to Karaqi upon her death.

As a result, much of the money he took was invested in the house, Latella said. He finished the basement, filled the home with new appliances and loaded the garage with tools. He even bought a pool table.

John S. Clark of Warren, Parker's son-in-law, said the family was suspicious of Karaqi from the first time they met him, but he convinced Parker to withdraw from the family.

Karaqi fled the country after Adult Protective Services began investigating him earlier this year, but he was arrested in July in Maine as he tried to re-enter the country from Canada.

Parker's family said they believe it will never be made whole monetarily. Latella said much of the money is accounted for in Karaqi's purchases for the home and a \$29,000 Jeep Liberty he is signing over to Parker. The family questions whether all the money will ever be accounted for.

Though Karaqi has been ordered to pay back the money he wired away, Latella said it could be difficult to collect. The money was apparently used to buy property in Kosovo, and the property is titled in another person's name.

"We just want to make sure somebody is waiting for him right when he walks out of jail and walks him right onto the plane," Clark said.

"But it's tough, because he's going to go back there and be a rich man."

Contact NATE TRELA at 586-469-8087 or trela@freepress.com.

Questions to ask before hiring a health care provider

Hiring a home health care provider who is not affiliated with an agency can be risky because it can be difficult to verify credentials or lodge complaints.

The Visiting Nurse Association of Southeast Michigan, the state's largest independent nonprofit home health care and hospice agency, offers a guide to help people choose a provider.

Here are some of the questions it suggests asking:

■ Does Medicare certify the agency the person works for?

Certification means the agency meets a minimum level of federal requirements.

■ Is the agency accredited?

Completing a voluntary accreditation process can show a commitment to a higher standard.

■ Will the agency send a supervisor to the home periodically to evaluate the quality of care?

■ How does the agency train employees?

■ Will there be a written plan of care?

A plan would show what will be done, by whom and for how long, and you and your family should be able to review it.

■ Will the nurse or therapist conduct an evaluation of the individual's needs in the home?

■ Does the agency provide written statements describing its services, eligibility requirements, fees and funding sources?

A free copy of the Consumer's Guide to Home Health Care, which includes other tips, can be ordered from the nurses association by calling 248-967-8374.

If you already have a home health care provider and believe you're not receiving proper care, contact the agency first.

If the agency doesn't resolve the problem, or you're having problems with an independent worker, you can lodge a complaint with the Michigan Department of Community Health at 800-882-6006.

Source: Visiting Nurse Association of Southeast Michigan

Monday, September 12, 2005

Man charged in slaying, assault of elderly acquaintances Parolee allegedly killed Farmington wife, 85, critically hurt husband, 85, who had befriended him.

The Detroit News

A 47-year-old parolee was charged Sunday with first degree murder and attempted murder in the attack on an elderly Farmington couple who had befriended him, authorities said.

Robert Jackson was arraigned Sunday in 47th District Court in the stabbing death of Dorothy Smith, 85, and the critical wounding of her 87-year-old husband, Lloyd, last week in their home on State Street.

Lloyd Smith remains in critical but stable condition at Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills, said Farmington Public Safety Department Cmdr. John Coyle.

The attack occurred Wednesday night or Thursday morning, and Farmington detectives got a warrant Friday charging Jackson in the case.

Jackson was arrested by Detroit police at about 9 p.m. Saturday at a bus stop on Gratiot and Vernor on the city's east side. Police turned him over to Farmington public safety officers.

Jackson admitted to the attack and told detectives that he threw the knife out of the window of his car as he was fleeing the area, according to a statement from by the public safety department.

Coyle said the long-bladed kitchen knife may be along Farmington Road between Grand River and Interstate 96 and asked that anyone who finds it contact the police department.

Jackson had known the Smiths for years and had been sent to prison for robbing and beating them in 1998. Officers said the couple had still befriended him again since he had been paroled. \

Jackson is being held in the Oakland County Jail pending a Sept. 21 preliminary examination on the charges in 47th District Court.

Firefighter who took drugs from seniors sentenced to year in jail

Linwood man apologizes for actions; says he was hooked on narcotics

By Crystal Harmon Bay City Times Writer

Martin D. Dean apologized to the public and his family for using his position as a Bay City firefighter to gain access to the apartments - and drug supplies - of senior citizens earlier this year.

"I understand the gravity of my crimes and actions," Dean, 37, of Linwood, told Bay County Circuit Judge William J. Caprathe on Monday.

Dean said he's undergoing counseling and random drug testing and is kicking the habit that's plagued him for a decade, since he became hooked on narcotics while battling cancer.

"I have already lost my wife, my children, my career," he said, imploring the judge to impose a lenient sentence. "I promise I will not get into any trouble in the future."

Despite objections from Assistant Bay County Prosecutor Richard I. Dresser, Caprathe sentenced Dean to a year at the Bay County Jail, with work release - a sentence below state guidelines.

In July, Dean pleaded guilty to five counts of second-degree home invasion; the charges carried a maximum possible penalty of 15 years each. State guidelines called for a minimum sentence of one to two years in prison.

Caprathe, however, sent Dean to the Bay County Jail and allowed work release from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. so Dean can work at his father's auto shop in Linwood.

Dean originally had been charged with five counts of home invasion in the first degree - 20 year felonies. Those charges were dropped in exchange for his guilty pleas to the second-degree home invasion charges.

Caprathe said that Dean "created a great deal of fear and anxiety" when he entered the apartments of senior citizens at night to steal their medication.

While Caprathe said Dean's crimes "cannot be tolerated," he said several factors led him to a lighter sentence.

Those factors, Caprathe said, include the fact that Dean's crimes were not motivated by greed, that jail would be more conducive to rehabilitation than would be prison, that Dean had no prior criminal record and that he's already suffered for his crimes.

The Bay City Fire Department dismissed Dean from his position.

Caprathe also ordered Dean to turn in any fire department clothes and equipment he might have, to hold no jobs that grant him public authority, to abstain from drugs and liquor, to pay \$1,200 in fines and to serve five years probation.

"You still have 15 years hanging over your head," he said of the potential maximum sentence. "If you fail, you will go to prison. This is an opportunity for you."

Dean was accused of using his fire department key card to enter city-owned senior citizen apartments at night and search for narcotic painkillers.

Some of the residents woke to find Dean in their apartment, and he allegedly assured them he was checking on them.

Gust said the Dean "is not a typical criminal defendant," and that he's working hard to maintain sobriety.

Dresser, however, countered that Dean "took advantage of his position of trust to gain entry into people's apartments while they were there. These were older people. They were scared. One had just had heart-bypass surgery."

Dresser said 95 percent of criminal defendants, by his estimate, have drug or alcohol addictions, and that Dean should not get a break.

Crystal Harmon covers Bay County courts for The Times. She may be reached at 894-9643 or by e-mail at charmon@bc-times.com.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

N e w s R e l e a s e

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Michigan Department of Human Services Summarily Suspends the Group Day Care Home License of Christina Martinez

September 12, 2005

The Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Children and Adult Licensing issued an order of summary suspension and notice of intent to revoke the license of Isabella county group day care home provider Christina Martinez, 5419 East Hazel Lane, Mount Pleasant, Michigan. This action resulted from two recent investigations of complaints from the child day care group home.

The July 29 and the September 9, 2005, complaint investigations found violations of the Child Care Organizations Act and/or day care family home promulgated rules requiring "emergency action" under the Michigan Administrative Procedures Act, MCL 24.292(2).

Effective 6:00 p.m., September 12, 2005, the Summary Suspension Order prohibits Christina Martinez from operating a group day care home at 5419 East Hazel Lane, Mount Pleasant, Michigan or at any other address or location. Accordingly, she may not accept children for care after that date and time. The order also requires Ms. Martinez to inform all of the parents of children in her care that her license has been suspended and that she can no longer provide day care.

Ms. Martinez has held a license to operate a group day care home since August 21, 2002. The license was for 12 children.

Michigan law defines a group day care home as a private home in which more than six but not more than 12 minor children are given care and supervision for periods of less than 24 hours a day, unattended by a parent or legal guardian, except children related to an adult member of the family by blood, marriage, or adoption. Group day care home includes a home that gives care to an unrelated minor child for more than four weeks during a calendar year.

For more information, consult DHS Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs.

Canton Day-Care Provider Sentenced In Abuse Case

Woman Ordered To Take Anger Management Class

POSTED: 5:13 pm EDT September 12, 2005

DETROIT -- A Canton day-care provider was sentenced at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice in downtown Detroit Monday morning, Local 4 reported.

Nancy Podorsek (pictured, right) was sentenced to probation and ordered to take an anger management class and perform community service.

Podorsek was accused of abusing a 2-year-old girl because the child soiled her pants, according to the station's reports.

"That's what she's told us, that she was angry at her for having a bowel movement," said the girl's mother, Elaine LaMontagne, when speaking with Local 4 in June. "She's 2. She's in diapers."

Podorsek faced charges after injuries were allegedly found on the girl's private parts, Local 4 reported.

She was initially charged with second-degree criminal sexual conduct, but that charge was eventually dropped and Podorsek pleaded guilty to third-degree child abuse, the station reported. Podorsek admitted to police that she may have rubbed the girl too hard when she was giving her a bath, the station reported.

LaMontagne said that Podorsek's sentence was too light and she's concerned that Podorsek will be able to open another day-care.

"She confesses to it and they give her a slap on the wrist," LaMontagne said.

The state of Michigan said Podorsek's day-care license has been suspended and will most likely be revoked.

Podorsek told Local 4 that she would never deliberately hurt a child.

YWCA violence shelter staffers getting crash course in Spanish

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

By Morgan Jarema
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Domestic violence and sexual assault are scary and confusing. It can be even more confusing when you're trying to get help and no one speaks your language. Officials at Kent County's largest domestic violence shelter want to make sure that doesn't happen to their Spanish-speaking clients.

Front-line staffers at the YWCA in downtown Grand Rapids, and some members of United Way affiliates the YWCA works with, are taking a crash course in basic Spanish so they can better serve victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

By the end of the month, 20 people will have had 20 hours of Spanish instruction in coordination with the Hispanic Center of West Michigan. Though not enough to be fluent, they will learn key phrases such as "Are you hurt?" "Are you in danger?" and "Your appointment is at two o'clock." Thirteen others are on a waiting list for a future class.

YWCA Executive Director Carla Blinkhorn said Hispanics and Latinos make up nearly 20 percent of their clientele. A large number don't speak English.

While some YWCA staffers are fluent in Spanish, they aren't always available.

"This (training) really came from our support staff, who are our clients' first contact and not always proficient in Spanish," Blinkhorn said. "They felt they needed to learn enough basic Spanish that focuses on our services, so that when a woman calls they can get her connected to a person who is bilingual."

Class member Carlene Grassmid knows all about making connections.

As a Dwelling Place caseworker for families coming out of transitional housing programs, she said she's called on a lot to come up with resources for those in need.

She also is a board member of the Kent County Community Violence Prevention Coalition's domestic violence branch, which works with the county's domestic assault response team and educates police and clergy about domestic violence issues.

"We are very aware in this community that domestic violence hits all populations," she said.

"But so few of the folks who are providing services speak Spanish. We want that population to feel like we're doing what we can to make this accessible to them."

The Spanish class is part of a larger effort to reach out to those in the Spanish-speaking community. The YWCA also plans to offer a Spanish-language support group for its clients, as well as tutoring. It also will offer training for 15 Spanish-speaking volunteers to organize a community watch program to let people know about area resources.

Man pleads guilty in Easter slaying

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

cricks@kalamazoogazette.com 388-8557

A Portage man who waited for his estranged wife to arrive at her apartment on Easter so he could shoot her pleaded guilty Monday to first-degree felony murder.

Michael Alfred Ridge, 55, of Oakland Drive, told Kalamazoo County Circuit Judge J.

Richardson Johnson that he killed his wife, 50-year-old Mary Deborah Ridge, on the night of March 27.

When Richardson asked whether the killing was intentional, Ridge said, "Yes," and wiped his eyes.

Ridge said he entered his wife's Walnut Trail apartment off Newport Road in Portage and waited three hours for her to enter.

"I went in to talk to her," said Ridge, who explained he got in by breaking through the ceiling of the woman's apartment.

Defense attorney Roger Snell said it's unusual for a client to plead guilty to first-degree murder because it carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

In this case, Ridge entered the plea to spare his family and the family of Mary Ridge a murder trial, Snell said.

Portage authorities have said Michael Ridge shot his wife three times with a short-barreled shotgun after the two argued.

Court documents allege that Ridge had attacked his wife nearly three months before her death.

Mary Ridge fled her Schoolcraft home in January after being assaulted and choked by her husband, according to court documents.

A short time later, she sought a personal-protection order against Michael Ridge and later filed for divorce after three-and-a-half years of marriage.

As a part of Monday's guilty plea, Michael Ridge will have four other charges against him dropped, Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Diane Hungerford said. Those include open murder, two counts of felony firearm and possession of a short-barreled shotgun.

Michael Ridge is scheduled to be sentenced on Oct. 24.

16-year-old charged with assault

Girl says he broke into apartment

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

BY AMALIE NASH Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Terence DeWayne Leonard was charged as an adult in the Saturday morning incident in the 1100 block of Share Avenue. He was arraigned on charges of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and home invasion.

Sheriff's Cmdr. Dave Egeler said the girl and several other teens were spending the night in an apartment and invited three boys over for protection because they feared reprisal from a neighbor for past problems. No adults were present in the apartment.

At some point, the boys left the apartment and the girls went to sleep, Egeler said. They left a back window unsecured, and Leonard - who was one of the boys at the apartment earlier - is accused of returning, crawling through the window and sexually assaulting the girl, Egeler said. She screamed and the assailant ran from the apartment.

Later in the weekend, the girls were in Ypsilanti and saw officers speaking with Leonard in an unrelated matter and alerted them to the sexual assault, Egeler said. He was arrested and turned over to sheriff's deputies.

Leonard is being held at the juvenile detention center.

Amalie Nash can be reached at anash@annarbornews.com

Michigan Report

September 12, 2005

SCHOOLS WORRIED ABOUT PRE-K FUNDING IN BUDGET

A still unresolved question of how to fund developmental kindergarten programs for local school districts has many districts across the state worried, as state lawmakers begin final deliberations on the 2005-06 budget. Districts are worried that a Senate proposal to fund children attending those programs as half a full-time student instead of as a full-time student, as they are now, could cut their funding now one month into the new school year.

If the change in funding is adopted, school officials hope it will at least be delayed until the 2006-07 school year.

"It really, really troubles us" if the funding formula would be changed for the 2005-06 fiscal year, said Tom White of the Michigan School Business Officials, since schools have already hired personnel based on the students in developmental kindergarten getting full-student funding.

The half-student funding passed the Senate version of the 2005-06 K-12 School Aid budget but not the House. A conference committee for the budget has not yet been scheduled, but Rep. John Moolenaar (R-Midland) said he was hoping to schedule one for Thursday.

Developmental kindergarten is held for young children not quite ready for kindergarten. It teaches those children social skills and some basic academic skills.

The programs are half-day and most kindergarten programs are half-day, but students in each are financed as full-time students, said Sen. Ron Jelinek (R-Three Oaks). "If you put kids in for two years at a half-day for each program then they get one-year of school," he said.

If the funding is changed then the state could save some \$6 million.

Mr. Moolenaar said he hoped to restore in the budget special funding for middle school mathematics programs. The House Appropriations Committee had funded those programs at an additional \$65 per student, which would total \$25 million, but that figure was knocked down by the full House.

Mr. Moolenaar said he hoped an agreement could be reached that would finance the program at a level closer to what the House committee supported.

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Detroit offers housing aid to Gulf Coast evacuees

By Judy Lin / The Detroit News

It hasn't worked out yet, but Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick says he is still trying to make good on a plan to turn hurricane victims into new Detroit residents.

The city told the state last week that it can accommodate up to 500 families affected by Hurricane Katrina, partly by handing out federal housing vouchers for seniors and low-income families.

Kilpatrick said the city is assessing its plan and has been working with various agencies to find shelter. The mayor initially said he hoped to get airlines to fly victims to Detroit for free. However, his staff indicated that hadn't happened by Monday.

The Detroit Housing Commission estimates it could make 150 public housing units available, though most of the units would be restricted to seniors. Hurricane victims who had been receiving federal housing aid also could be transferred to Detroit as long as a landlord accepts the vouchers, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which took over the housing commission in July.

HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson has asked all public housing agencies to volunteer any unused housing vouchers for hurricane victims. HUD will then give priority to those families that were already in public housing in New Orleans, followed by low-income families.

You can reach Judy Lin at (313) 222-2072 or jlin@detnews.com.

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Wayne County links veterans with benefits

Second annual event educates soldiers' families about health screenings, tax help and counseling.

By Darren A. Nichols / The Detroit News

Brandyce Monroe, 24, plans to attend the Wayne County Stand Down to encourage her fellow veterans to apply for the benefits to which they are entitled.

Sponsored by the Wayne County veterans' affairs division, the Sept. 30 Stand Down offers an array of services to active, inactive, retired or reserve vets and their families: health screenings, counseling services, tax help from IRS officers and other benefit services from state and federal agencies, including the Social Security Administration.

As a veteran who served about six months in Kabul, Afghanistan, Monroe knows the importance of government benefits. Without them, she said, she wouldn't be at Wayne State University. Monroe decided to enroll after returning in March 2004.

"I want to help out and give back to those veterans who went to Vietnam (and other places)," Monroe said

The term Stand Down dates to the Civil War, when combat troops "stood down" to resupply and recuperate.

"Once you become a part of the armed forces, you're like a family," Monroe said.

"They depend on those (services). A lot of people are homeless, (and) don't have anything like family. My benefits are very important for me. If they get cut off, I don't have a way to pay for school."

Wayne County's veterans' affairs chief, Joseph Howard, said the second annual Stand Down, at Historic Fort Wayne, is intended to link new veterans with the benefits to which they are entitled. Families with soldiers, sailors and airmen serving in Iraq or Afghanistan are invited, because county, state and federal military agencies offer a number of relief benefits to help families while their men and women are in the service.

The first Stand Down drew about 400 people last year, when it was held in Westland. Howard, a Vietnam veteran, said many vets are hesitant to seek assistance in meeting their basic needs, such as shelter or food. Some have no health insurance.

"We are starting to see more evidence of veterans returning from Iraq and making the transition back into society," Howard said. "The process is slow when they are waiting to return to old jobs or for benefits to begin, so they have to come to us for assistance."

Of the more than 26 million American veterans, more than 172,000 live in Wayne County, officials said. Most served in Vietnam. More than half of all veterans are believed to lack private insurance; a quarter have no health coverage.

While the number of American vets is expected to decline sharply in coming years, to about 20 million, the number of needy veterans probably will increase as the men and women age, the Veterans Administration said.

For veterans with drug or alcohol addictions, conditions are even worse. Some who are unemployed, undereducated and homeless rely on panhandling to survive.

The Stand Down event is an extension of the services provided daily by the Veterans' Affairs Division, which also offers burial assistance and emergency relief to honorably discharged wartime veterans and their spouses and dependent children.

"Quite often, a veteran just won't get up and go to the federal building or medical center unless it's an emergency," Howard said. "We're trying to knock down those doors to say, 'We're here for you. We're here to advocate on your behalf.' That's what they need."

"If they need the help, they should get it," said Wit Kaczanowski, 81 of Dearborn, who served in the Marines. "The government claims they will take care of them, but it's real difficult to get assistance."

Help for veterans

What: Stand Down, a one-day fair for veterans

When: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 30

Where: Historic Fort Wayne, on Jefferson, just west of Clark Street and south of Fort Street in southwest Detroit.

Information: Call (313) 224-5045

You can reach Darren A. Nichols at (734) 462-2190 or dnichols@detnews.com.

Column: No flood here, but ravages of poverty are

Sunday, September 11, 2005

By Peter Luke
Lansing Bureau

As Michigan residents have generously opened up their wallets to help the displaced poor of the Gulf Coast, perhaps their elected officials might entertain a similar project right here.

Hurricane Katrina did more than wipe out a city. When the winds subsided, it also exposed the fact that two Americas not only remain, but continue to grow more economically disparate.

There are two Michigans as well, and perhaps a broad acknowledgment is now possible.

Like Louisiana, there are deep pockets of poverty and despair in this state. Places where people live in substandard housing in crime-battered neighborhoods, attend school but don't graduate, go to work every day but never get ahead.

Welfare reform has helped Michigan's poor enter the workforce and more recent attempts to cut health care benefits have been defeated.

But Michigan's response to poverty has also been marked by disinvestment and disinterest.

Urban schools generally receive less state aid per pupil than suburban schools when a poor kid logically would require more educational help to break out of poverty. When local schools funded largely with state aid are badly run, the state is reluctant to demand long-term change.

According to last year's findings of Lt. Gov. John Cherry's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, the state doesn't even have reliable data on the true extent of its high school dropout rate. National estimates say it could be as high as 35 percent. High school dropouts rarely become economic successes.

Kids drop out because chances are they started falling behind back in the second grade. One big problem is that children of the poor drift from school to school during the year as their parents move from one substandard rental to the next.

Educators and social workers in Flint are trying one possible solution: Try and keep the parents from moving so much by securing decent, stable housing and helping with the rent. The state-funded pilot program is now in its second year, but only in two grades in two of 26 elementary schools. If it works, there is little money to expand it.

According to state law, the Legislature is supposed to provide Michigan's cities a fixed percentage of state tax receipts, called revenue sharing. And every year of late, that law gets waived to balance a discretionary state budget hobbled by tax cuts. Next year, that waiver will cost cash-strapped cities nearly \$400 million in lost state aid, forcing still more budget cuts in basic services such as neighborhood police patrols and housing code enforcement.

When the state got its hands on tobacco lawsuit settlement money that should have gone to public health outreach, it was promptly diverted toward college scholarships to mostly suburban kids. Once again this year, public health advocates are fighting not for increases, but fighting off cuts in state programs that screen poor women for breast cancer, test children for lead poisoning and combat infant mortality and childhood diabetes.

Lawmakers last week argued for tax relief at the gas pump in response to higher prices. But for years they have been unable to cobble together a metro-Detroit mass transit system that

efficiently moves the poor from home to work. The urban poor could buy a car like everyone else. Too bad their insurance rates are more than double those in the suburbs.

Also being discussed this summer is a strict time limit on welfare benefits. There appears to be no corresponding movement toward allowing those receiving welfare to also earn more through work. Right now the poor can earn a maximum of \$774 monthly through a combination of cash assistance and wages, a sum that hasn't been increased in 12 years. In Illinois, a mother with children could earn at least \$400 more than that and still receive state aid to help pay the rent. The poor are more than willing to work. A six-year University of Michigan tracking study of some 750 single mothers on welfare back in 1997 found that after work-support measures like day care, child health care and transportation were provided, workforce participation increased significantly.

Take away the flood and Michigan's poor have the same challenges as Louisiana's. They need help too.

Students in poverty

State should focus resources, rewards to aid most needy

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, September 13, 2005

It's easy to condemn teachers who give up on impoverished, hard-to-teach students, but that is not altogether fair, let alone constructive.

Rather, it would be better to view a stark admission by Michigan educators in a poll as a case for improving these troubled learning environments so more children succeed.

In plain truth, all teaching jobs aren't equal, yet the system generally treats them that way.

Teachers in the toughest schools are not paid more for their responsibilities, let alone given the social service and other resources required to reduce the chronic achievement deficit of disadvantaged youngsters.

Even the federal Title 1 program that provides extra money for poor districts does not close the learning gap, as this funding often is not used for services, such as early learning programs, which would make a major difference.

The result is so much frustration among those on the front lines that 43 percent of Flint teachers surveyed told EPIC-MRA pollsters that they believe "a lot" or "some" teachers give up on certain students with culturally diverse backgrounds. Statewide, 50 percent of teachers answered similarly to that question posed by the Lansing-based polling firm, and 69 percent said educating poor children was a major challenge.

None of this should be surprising, and it speaks poorly of politicians, state educational policymakers, school officials and unions for failing to reform a system that hasn't worked for the most needy students. What chance do these children stand of a decent future if teachers, either because of training shortcomings or circumstances they face, conclude that trying to educate some youngsters isn't worth their efforts?

The answer is self-evident, yet Michigan hasn't manifestly changed the educational landscape to focus resources and institute rewards - like merit pay - to fix our biggest problem. It's imperative that we make that commitment.

Op-Ed Columnist

Meet the Fakers

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
The New York Times

Published: September 13, 2005

The biggest gathering of leaders in history unfolds this week at the United Nations, as they preen and boast about how much they're helping the world's poor. In short, it may be the greatest assembly in history - of hypocrites.

The fact is that with just a few exceptions, the presidents and prime ministers coming to the U.N. summit are doing a disgraceful job in helping the poor. That's one reason the world's richest 500 individuals have the same income as the world's poorest 416 million people.

We Americans set a dreadful example as hosts to the summit. President Bush has been trying to wriggle away from his 2002 endorsement of the principle that rich countries should try to provide 70 cents in official development assistance for every \$100 in national income. (Mr. Bush has sharply increased foreign aid from the Clinton years, but it still stood at only 16 cents in 2004 for each \$100 of national income.)

The Bush administration also tried to change summit documents to downplay references to the millennium development goals of overcoming poverty. Fortunately, the Bush administration backed off and now grudgingly joins the international consensus against infant mortality.

It's common to hear abroad scathing criticisms of U.S. stinginess, much of it deserved. But Japan is also a cheapskate, giving only a hair more than the U.S., and Italy gives even less.

The new Human Development Report 2005, recently issued by the U.N. Development Program, is blessedly undiplomatic in its willingness to point figures - at just about everybody. It notes that the U.S. and other rich countries seem unwilling to provide a total of \$7 billion annually for the next decade to provide 2.6 billion people with access to clean drinking water. That investment would save 4,000 lives a day, and the cost is less than Europeans spend on perfume - or than Americans spend on cosmetic surgery.

Meanwhile, the report adds, AIDS kills three million people a year and devastates countries like nothing since the Black Death in the 14th century. Yet annual world spending to fight AIDS amounts to three days of military expenditures.

This U.N. summit is meant to review the millennium development goals, such as cutting child deaths around the world by two-thirds by 2015. All the goals, adopted with great fanfare five years ago, are feasible, and some countries - from Bangladesh to Indonesia, Brazil to Mongolia -

are on track to meet them. Hats off to them. But most of the world appears likely to miss the goals.

Two countries that should be the leaders of the developing world, China and India, are both off track and should be ashamed of their records. In India, among children 1 to 5, girls are 50 percent more likely to die than boys, meaning that each year 130,000 Indian girls are discriminated to death.

Bangladesh has now overtaken India in improving child mortality, and Vietnam has overtaken China. If India had matched Bangladesh's rate of reduction in child mortality over the last decade, according to the U.N.D.P., it would have saved 732,000 children's lives this year. Likewise, China has largely ignored its poor interior, so it still loses 730,000 children each year. China has also taken diplomatic positions that hurt the world's most vulnerable populations, by supporting Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and by implicitly endorsing Sudan's genocide just as it once endorsed Pol Pot's.

And African leaders? Perhaps this is naïve, but it strikes me as racist for them to have complained about brutal white rule in South Africa or Zimbabwe while excusing black rule that is even more brutal.

Readers often ask if I find it depressing to visit African slums or mud-brick villages. On the contrary, it's exhilarating to see how little it takes to make a difference. Ancient scourges like river blindness and leprosy are being controlled, and a clever initiative by Bill Gates and others to promote vaccinations (the Global Alliance for Vaccinations and Immunization) saved more than one million lives just between 2001 and 2004.

That makes it maddening to see leaders posturing for the cameras at the U.N. while, as the U.N.D.P. report notes, "the promise to the world's poor is being broken." The report adds that the gap between the current trendline on child mortality and the one the leaders committed themselves to amounts to 41 million children dying before their fifth birthday over the next decade.

Rather than toasting themselves, these leaders should apologize for this continuing holocaust.

E-mail: nicholas@nytimes.com